Sauternes

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Sauternes

by Mikanis

Summary

> “No, I am holding you up, Will.” He replied curtly. “And, I have drugged you, so that may be the case for the next few hours.”
>
> “You…can’t…do that, it’s not genuine.” Will broke away, stumbling. He didn’t even know what he was saying, but it sounded plausible enough in light of how very disembodied he felt in that precise moment.
>
> “Is it not?” Hannibal looked at him. He stood there, dignified and pristine, painted in blood with a fresh gout spilling from his split upper lip over his chin, shoulders squared, and expression enigmatically accommodating, calling across the room, “Will, I need to stitch your hand.”
>
> Will fled.

Notes

> It has been years since I attempted this, and the writer's block seems so very high. Bear with me while I find my voice.
>
> I'm very fond of this incarnation of Hannibal, but not sold on how flawless his 'person-suit' is. I'm sure plot will arise/interfere at some point, but this is mostly an exercise for me, so please don't hold me to that. I have left myself opportunity to work in Season 1 plot elements, but I don't think it's going to go there. 90% of this story is going to happen inside the house. So.
>
> Cheers all, Step Lightly.

Staccato

It was remarkably similar to living with a caged animal. They rarely interacted as what started as a goodwill gesture stretched on. Whether he was actually welcome or not was somewhat ambiguous, so Will simply didn't broach it, weighing his every paycheck against the cost of an extended stay hotel. Hannibal continued to cook for him, and nothing in his manner or tone could be construed as angry, or rude, but there was very obviously something…off. Will sat in the living room by the fire, glancing up from his book at the sound of the key in the lock, reluctant to brush minds with him again. That was a professional courtesy Hannibal had extended him in their stay together, never forcing him to interact when it wasn't necessary. He didn't seem to consider Will's long evenings alone in his room a criticism of his hospitality, but a very necessary dose of quiet. For a man like Will, nothing about Hannibal was quiet.

He opened the door and a carpet of cold air ushered him in. He wore traces of snow on his collar with the unperturbed expression of someone who was raised in a much colder climate, and it made the drifts outside seem vain in their effort to compare to his memory. Hannibal never seemed cold. He closed the door and turned the lock in a fluid motion, immediately upon the mat for his shoes. His keys hung under the foyer's light switch, and his wallet, watch, and kerchief were carefully placed along the buffet table at the door. Stepping away from his shoes, he took up the kerchief again briefly to knock away the excess water from the fur trim on his outer-most layer, and then it went into the closet. Routine, practiced, and unrelentingly patterned…it had taken Will a week to get into the habit of putting his winter wear away. Finding it neatly hung in the closet every day felt like a silent rebuke for his habit of tossing it over the nearest chair. There was nothing out of place in this house. There was nothing out of place about him. Hannibal did not tolerate non-functional clutter. To a man with seven dogs, it seemed excessive, and silently…loud. He sighed as the psychiatrist unbuttoned his sleeves and vest next, checking his watch one last time before stepping away.

And there, a cold, intimate tightening in his bones as those eyes fell on him. There was a stark difference in perceiving Hannibal and being perceived by Hannibal. The image in the mirror was skewed, and it emanated a physical disruption that his mind could not translate as anything but wrong. And perhaps, better. It was an inimicable wave of consciousness, as though Hannibal moved and the room moved with him, overshadowed the house and its sundry walls, shaking its foundation. His gaze brought a void, a complete and calculated emptiness that stripped him of his idle thoughts and hushed his heart to a murmur in the grass...letting him forget, for a moment, his role as the mongoose, and becoming another small bit of meat and fur and nothing more. The foyer's chandelier was modest and dim, warm and welcoming, but it made the translucent white of his shirt glow and cast handsome shadows that obscured his eyes. Hannibal seemed to stand aside from the light, beneath it, and untouched. Will shifted with his book, sitting a little straighter despite his sudden resolve to be still. That was currently the most confusing aspect of Hannibal Lecter, the unsettled vibrancy of the man's presence here, in his house. He'd sorted through the edges of their relationship to the best of his ability, looking for weakness or some form of deception in their interaction. It was never that Hannibal lied to him, simply that he held a truth so large it could not be parceled in a coherent manner. The older man wandered closer, standing in the

doorway, and the shadows played over a neutral expression with softened edges. That wasn't...genuine, though, Will was sure of it. There was a tension in his movement that spoke of disquiet, perhaps the most graceful caricature of unease that Will had ever seen, and he regretted being the source. The perceived source, at least. He still hadn't worked nerve up to ask if his continued intrusion into Hannibal's living space was causing the friction he felt in his head. He was still convinced that he was exaggerating it to some degree. Everything about him was too practiced. Hannibal glanced at the side table just at Will's elbow and smiled slightly, and his voice broke the static in Will's head. "I see you have fixed the coffee machine."

"I have." Will smiled at the air between Hannibal's chest and his chair. The 'machine' in question was a fully automated espresso and latte machine that likely cost as much as Will's used truck did, but he had managed to take apart the brew group to replace a leaking gasket in the water line while waiting on the other to return. "I was wondering if we could talk?"

"Of course." He answered warmly, nodding towards the dining room and kitchen. "Would you like to help with dinner?"

Would he like some physical labor to do while he sorted his thoughts out? "Yes, very much."

He dropped his ankle from his knee and stood, smoothing his robe down over his shirt and trousers. He was used to bundling up in thicker layers when he was at home, but Hannibal kept his house much warmer than Will did. He felt too informal to share a space with him. That was the root of it, surely. Hannibal had gifted him the robe, however, so again, perhaps that tension was one-sided. He followed the older man into the kitchen and watched the set of his shoulders change as he assessed the working area. This was perhaps the one real place he'd ever seen Hannibal slouch. Smiling at his back, he watched him cross to inspect the machine, lifting his chin a bit and pretending not to notice the doctor surreptitiously run a finger under its edge. Will had moved it and cleaned the entire space before detailing the machine itself when he was done. Hannibal seemed obviously pleased. "No more leaking espresso…that is such a relief. Thank you, Will."

Will blinked, because there was some kind of blunt pressure associated with Hannibal attaching his name to the end of a sentence. Like an unexpected hand on his shoulder. "It was a simple thing. I'm afraid I may have voided the warranty, however."

"I won't tell if you won't." Hannibal answered smoothly, the corner of his mouth curled into a confident smirk as he put a demitasse cup under the spout and pressed a button. While the beans were grinding, he stepped over to the refrigerator and opened it. Deft hands pulled some unlabeled red meat from the bottom shelf, and a butternut squash from above that. "I wondered, were I to bring home a bulk selection of fish from the market, would you be willing to assist me with the butchering tomorrow?"

"Gladly. Just don't expect me to turn it into something…French." Will hovered near the coffee machine, replacing Hannibal's cup with his own and starting a large black coffee. He handed the doctor's coffee off and received a cutting board in return. Waiting until the grinder stopped again, he claimed the short island for himself and waited diligently. Hannibal dampened a cloth and passed it to him. He placed it flat on the smooth counter and set his cutting board on top of it, and received a paring knife next. The squash and a small selection

of vegetables in a clear bin appeared next to his board, and Will nodded, settling in to his task of cleaning the vegetables.

Hannibal paused when the heat clicked on, realizing Will's attire for the first time. Will didn't notice until he asked, "Are you cold?"

"…Yes, but it's better now that I'm moving around." He nodded as he talked, peeling the squash with some difficulty.

"Will, you are welcome to turn the heat on if you arrive here sooner than I do." Hannibal sounded…not concerned, but if there was such a thing as forced genteel, Will thought that might be it. He glanced at him from the corner of his eye and that was almost too much, and he retreated to the safety of his board. "It is on a timer, but I would rather you be comfortable."

"That's actually what I was hoping to discuss with you." He gestured with his paring knife, talking to the air in front of him instead of Hannibal directly. "I have…been here almost six weeks, and aside from providing a bottle of wine, you have asked me for nothing. I took the coffee machine upon myself, but I wish you would ask, if you…", and he hesitated on needed, because he seriously doubted Hannibal needed him for anything, "…wanted me to participate more in the household. I can cook simple meals."

Hannibal smiled. "I don't eat simple meals."

"I can do laundry."

"My dry cleaning is delivered."

"…I don't clean very well."

"That is why I do not ask."

"….You're trying to rile me." Will said with a dry laugh, looking at Hannibal at last and finding that smirk still comfortable at the edge of his smile. "You're not abiding by any creed of college dorm cohabitation than I'm familiar with, so if you would like more from me, please ask."

"I wish you would talk more." Hannibal answered, tying a long apron around his waist. "This is nice. I genuinely enjoy our conversation, and not every conversation we have has to be as patient and therapist, or investigator and consultant."

"You mean gymnast and ballast."

"That metaphor is more flattering than you think." Hannibal worked deftly at his end of the island, seasoning flour and breaking down fresh thyme into a ramekin. "I meant what I said. I understand that there needed to be a mourning period for the house and your belongings, but I cannot abide you feeling homeless in my house, either."

"I'm not trying to. It is an adjustment, but not just to the house. To you. Your routine and your…methods are completely divergent from my lifestyle. I have found it hard to relax

when I’m worried about leaving fingerprints on the glass coffee table.”

Hannibal nodded. Bolstered, Will continued, trimming the frond from the fennel. “And that is not a criticism of your hospitality, in any way. It’s just an observation that I have never before spent so long in someone else’s headspace before, and it’s jarring. I haven’t seen my dogs in two weeks, and that house was full of things I would use to ground myself between cases. I could—“

“Exist freely there.” Hannibal stepped over his pause, but with a comprehension that Will found utterly annoying. He relaxed a little more as the therapist continued. “You’d built a box that put the entirety of your personality within arm’s reach, and spent years reinforcing that concept within your design. When you collected a stray, you’d bring him home and integrate him into that concept. Most people would describe that as the instinctive definition of 'home', but I'd imagine it's a much more devastating loss for an empath. We share that method of coping, though I daresay that our problems are vastly different.”

“Hannibal Lecter has a problem?” He’d meant it jokingly, but it came out a bit more scathing. Defensive, might be the better word. He regretted it. It was reflex reaction to what felt like the beginning of the ‘broken’ rhetoric he was accustomed to hearing from professors he’d never met in person. He tried to soften it. “And that analogy makes me a stray.”

“No. My pathology is different, and yes, sometimes problematic. Your mind is empathically drawn to aberrations with the intent to understand, and I…do not always fit, in my own mind.” Hannibal sipped his espresso, considering his statement and its phrasing. “It is hard for me to feel…adequately portrayed at any given moment. Like you, I inflict myself on my surroundings in an attempt to make them fit my understanding of the world. Sometimes they measure up, sometimes they do not. Where you are hardwired to receive and dissect, I am built to overtake.”

“Yes.” Will hadn’t meant to say it out loud, hadn’t meant to look at him, but that was exactly it. The problem. The reason there never seemed to be enough air in the same room with him. He was surprised to hear his earlier thoughts come verbatim from the therapist as truth. Hannibal paused long enough to show him how he wanted the squash cut, and there was calm lull in the conversation. It was first time he’d felt a general quiet since Hannibal showed him to his room.

“Furthering that point, while out in public, I tend to very selectively broadcast elements of myself. I also find it necessary to adopt some from those around me, to ease my presence. It is not my intent to make people uncomfortable, but it's very distracting when they are. It feels like a constant bid for my attention, and I cannot abide such distractions. That is part of what led me to become a therapist, finding a method to share myself without...becoming Jack Crawford. With his endless use of microagression to bully people into being useful to him. There are better ways.”

Will snickered, “Your extroversion implodes, so you fall back on polite consensual manipulation?”

“…Yes. Exactly.” Hannibal arranged his ingredients and gestured to the other man to bring his within reach."And I rarely apologize for it, I'm afraid."

“Have you been trying to set me on edge these last few weeks?”

Hannibal lit a burner, smiling again, but he didn’t answer.

Broken Consort

Chapter Summary

In which Hannibal flexes, and Will dies a little.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They sat together for a long moment, letting the engine rumble quietly as they stared at the back of Jack Crawford's head. The man was on the phone more often than not, and Will tended to believe that had something to do with his interrupted speech patterns. He was constantly holding two or three conversations at once, but insisted on believing he was the heavyweight in those interactions and that he needed the final word. In the weeks since the fire at his home in Wolf Trap, Will Graham had numerous times been left to Jack Crawford's devices. Now that he was accessible, the man was keen to offer him rides to the academy and crime scenes, and lunch, and wherever else it was most convenient for him to be in Jack's opinion at that given moment. It took weeks still for him to broach the subject with Alana and Hannibal, that maybe the head of CIA's investigative department did not need to be his sole method of transportation. Thus, they had arranged to take a trip back to the farm to see if his backup vehicle was still functional, but Jack had intervened again, offering to send an agent to do that and issue Will a federal vehicle 'in the interim'. Said vehicle had yet to materialize.

Hannibal's words over dinner had illuminated an aspect of his relationship with Jack that he had not previously been aware of. Usually, when Jack railroaded a conversation, it ended before anyone had the opportunity to disagree with him. His refusal to yell at Hannibal and Alana was the singular exception Will had seen to his simple directive that his will be done. Hannibal and Alana, as consultants, were technically on his payroll but not under his supervision. Will, as a teaching associate and lecturer for the academy, tended to be a little more malleable. After prolonged contact, Jack's numerous frustrations began to focus on those nearest, so he would batter at Will like a new toy. Will found silence to be his most productive method of dealing with the man at that point in the day. With nothing to snag on, Jack's temper was reduced to a directionless tantrum, and that embarrassed him after a moment. Will defended himself when necessary, but it had never been more apparent to him that what most people wrote off as blunt and tenacious was actually forcible domination of a conversation. In a word, rude. The man was effective, however, Will would grant him that. Considering the amount of responsibility that he shouldered every day, he would grant Jack Crawford a lot, actually.

Hannibal, not so much.

Jack could work Hannibal into a rage if left to his own devices. The men's camaraderie was a sad thing to witness. Jack tried very, very hard to be considered worthy of Hannibal's

friendship, and Hannibal, on his best day, tolerated him. Not with the same derision he reserved for strangers and some of the CIA staff, but with a teeth-clenched, polished façade that Will only knew existed because he'd seen its shadow. He felt tension creeping into Hannibal's form, but couldn't explain exactly how. Just knowing that they shared the urge to steel themselves before dealing with Jack made him feel somewhat privy to the entity that was Home-Hannibal. Hannibal at Rest. Quiet Hannibal. Fuck.

The quiet was broken as the therapist turned his chin slightly to address Will, "Do you know what my first, greatest annoyance is, Will?"

"Hm?"

"Being interrupted." Will nodded to that, sipping his coffee, and Hannibal continued. "My second? Being contradicted."

That was a loaded sentiment and Will's brow furrowed, but Hannibal was opening his door to let the damnable chill in. He closed it gently, and made his way over to Jack. Will muttered to himself, "Every time you speak, the floor threatens to give way."

The phone dropped, a voice mumbling quietly into the empty air as Jack ignored it, speaking before they were truly within earshot, "Look, you've been very accommodating, Dr. Lecter, but I'm not convinced that it wasn't arson, and until my team tells me otherwise, I'm sticking to this course."

"No one brought it up, Jack. I was asking--"

Jack cut him off, his expression wounded, but his voice commanding, "Your expressions say a lot."

"I'm also a grown man standing less than two feet from you, Jack, I'll make my own excuses if you don't mind." Will shoved his hands in his pockets. "Mine are better anyway. How are my dogs?"

"Fat and happy. You should come see them."

"He needs a vehicle for that, Jack." Jack's eyes widened in surprise, and Will wondered if Hannibal knew what hell he'd just wrought on some poor desk jockey at the motor pool. "As for the rest, Will and I have worked out a rental arrangement for the spare rooms on my second floor. He will be staying there for the foreseeable future."

It took every shred of control Will had not to…contradict him. Jack's defensive posture dropped with a satisfied grunt, and he dismissed a stream of emails from his phone's screen. "Alright. That's alright then, good. You'll have the car today, I'm not sure what the delay is. Thank you both for your patience."

Will felt Hannibal take a deep breath and relax as well, though he couldn't say exactly how. They exchanged a glance, but the therapist was wearing his mask too well for him to guess at how serious that announcement was. Will roughed a hand through his hair, scratching the nape of his neck as he nodded to the box on the tarmac at Jack's side. "Is that for me?"

“Yes, these are crime scene files from the last six months. I’m granting you a month of leave to review them in your own time and see if you can turn up any new leads. There are also four solved cases in there that I’m not entirely satisfied with that I’d like you to review. If our guts don’t agree, that’s for me to get over…use them to build lectures. Yes, that’s official permission.”

And then, at times like this, Jack surprised him. There was no real reason for him to take the time off, and the added gift of cases that had already been solved…had an answer…was an opportune way for him to regain himself without being taken off the payroll. It suggested the three of them, Alana, Hannibal, and Jack, all were working in ways he was unaware of to ease this time of transition. He remembered Alana’s soft smile when they picked him up from the scene, and wondered to himself how involved she was. They had barely spoken over the years, but there was enough of her that seemed familiar to him, fit within in his definition of friendship that he was fond of her despite their distance. The pre-emptive answer on the lectures was nice, it spared him a lot of red tape and gave him a year’s worth of teaching material from which to work. He smiled broadly, and swept the box up, turning back to Hannibal’s car without saying goodbye. It would feel good to work again. Mostly.

He left Hannibal with Jack at the foot of the stairs and after another sip of coffee from his thermos, convinced himself that Dr. Lecter would say his goodbyes for him. Dr. Lecter removed his own cell phone and showed Jack something on its screen. There was a tense exchange, and both men set their shoulders resolutely, but from what Will could tell, no one won. Hannibal turned away while speaking and Jack nodded, raising his phone to his ear again.

The heat coming off Hannibal when he returned to the car was palpable. Will resisted the urge to make himself smaller by compromising, and refusing to interact with the therapist at all, instead turning his focus inward to pounce on that feeling. That. What the hell was that? Will was not a shy man, not a quiet man, and though aspects of his mind were decidedly fluid, he did not yield…especially to instinct. Yet, pulling out of the parking lot, he was claustrophobic in the weight of Hannibal’s…annoyance. Hannibal seemed a man of action. Will wondered what his rage looked like. On second thought, no….No he didn’t.

The heat subsided slowly. Very slowly. Will was rather sure that it didn’t actually go away, Hannibal just folded it neatly into a subsection of his head and like a magician’s trick, it had never happened. He was supposed to believe that at least. His thermos was empty, but he fidgeted with the slide, clearing his throat a bit. Hannibal’s grip on the steering wheel loosened as though Will had cracked his knuckles with a ruler. He took a deep even breath, his voice barely audible over the heat. “I apologize. Jack’s method of conversation leaves sand in my mouth.”

“That’s one way of putting it. The two of you disagreed on something after I walked away.” It was a statement, not a question, but he hoped it was leading enough that Hannibal wouldn’t make him ask. The stretch of highway between Richmond and Baltimore was long and straight, it would seem a lot longer if this kept up. Will was very bad at not picking up the moods of those in his immediate vicinity, but unlike Hannibal, he was very acidic when he was irritated.

“Will, I would like to blur the line between friend and therapist and ask this question as both.” Hannibal paused, picking his cell phone up again and resting it facedown on his thigh.

Will felt like was suddenly part of the conversation somehow. “ Do you want to work? Truly?”

“Work….Solve cases? No. Yes.” Will blinked hard, staring at the flurries of snow rolling over the windshield, pretending to have the conversation with himself. “I want this kind of work. Reviewing the narrative without having to step into it. This isn’t the same kind of work I do in the field. Similar, but not as taxing.”

Hannibal nodded. “Perhaps I was wrong then.”

“But you won’t apologize.” Will smiled, nudging his feet closer around the box.

“No…I won’t.” Hannibal lifted his own thermos and held the coffee on his tongue a moment, and Will could almost feel him channeling through his options of presentation. He settled on direct. “Alana was concerned that casework may not be the healthiest outlet for you at the moment. She and I disagreed, and Jack listened to neither party. Jack insisted on giving you that box. He and I disagreed.”

“It seems there are a lot of conversations going on when I’m not around.” Will bristled slightly. “It’s not like I was injured. It was a fire. I wasn’t home. Those opinions would make sense if I’d wrecked my truck on the interstate, or otherwise grievously wounded. I’m not so fragile as that.”

“I know that.” Hannibal replied, and his calm façade was suddenly infuriating. Will bit his lip. “I live with you.”

“How did all of those conversations happen and no one thought to ask me, then?”

“Will, you haven’t spoken to anyone in six weeks. You’re more or less at my disposal, living in my house, it seemed prudent to them to dig information out of me rather than interrupt whatever mental process you had employed in the meantime.”

“That…is a cop out.” Will bit off, but it was true. He had withdrawn enough that he communicated only his basic needs to those around him, and they had given him a wide berth. He could understand how that would seem to be request for one, but really, he was just terrible at asking for help. Hannibal’s insight and arrogance was bitter to him, but well intentioned, just as Jack’s hamfisted efforts to shelter him. “You knew why he was bringing us out to Richmond today. If you were so against the idea of my working again, why bring me?”

“I am not against the idea of you working, Will. Industry is helpful in the recovery process. I was against throwing you back into the field, which was Jack’s original suggestion.”

“Oh.”

“Yes.” Hannibal chuckled a bit, lifting his phone and opening the device without taking his eyes from the road. “I thought Alana was going to burn his office down. She threatened to drop out of the organization altogether if he dared try. It took him aback. The box was my compromise with Jack. I have made two compromises on your behalf so far.”

Will sat there, stunned, and his bitterness of moments before tasted like ash now. Of course Jack's first answer was to put him in the field. He was still convinced the fire was arson, and it was easier to justify the travel and lodging expenses if Will was working. That kind of travel would have drained him to the point of a coma in short order. Alana was right. Hannibal was better. Wait. "Two?"

"This is in equal part compromise with Alana, and a gift to you." Hannibal handed his phone over, and his personal email was displayed on the screen. "The top five are delivery notifications. Be a gentleman and do not read the entire invoice, just the contents."

Don't look at the price tag. They were gifts? Will looked, and then took the phone into his own hands so Hannibal could drive while he read them. The first was a desk. A beautiful writing desk, with two towers of small compartment drawers a wide, flat workspace. Its purpose was evident in the next email, from one of his favorite gear sites. A broad selection of feathers, beads, bone trinkets and iridescent metal scales, several threads and a roll of Spyder wire, an assortment of hooks, a magnifying glass light with clamps, and a set of pliers and craft knives in a wooden case with—

Will dropped the phone, looking completely at the man's profile, "Hannibal, what the hell is this."

"That didn't sound like a question." The older man smiled, relaxing into his seat. It didn't feel smug, but it screamed smug. Will squinted and went back to reading.

"A 10x8 portable storage building?"

"Ah, that one went to Jack's house. He's building a climate controlled kennel for the dogs. That's why you haven't seen them. He didn't want to explain the mess until he had time to put the parts into place."

"Mess?"

"His back porch has a tower of dog beds on it. They've all been microchipped; he has purchased the AC unit…I should stop, I will ruin his gift."
Will's voice was suddenly very lost in his chest, a little more hoarse. "What?"

"Apparently, his wife, Bella, loves dogs."

The next two were orders from Amazon, each with at least thirty titles listed under the address. He wasn't familiar with some of them, but after opening both, he realized he was looking at the full contents of his two bookshelves. The ones on either side of his old fireplace. "…You replaced my books."

"As many as I could remember, and a few that I wanted to suggest, but that conversation never happened."

Will closed the phone and set it back on the console, rubbing both hands over his face. Hannibal spared him a glance. "I wanted to apologize. For my part in our silence the last two months. I am designed to apply pressure, much like Jack is, but much more subtle, and in

ways that you would find very invasive. I was not sure how to…'cohabitate' without overriding your instinctive quiet, so I opted not to at all. It wasn't until we spoke last week that I realized how unapproachable that seemed to you."

He was nodding emphatically, still grappling with the pressure in his chest, something torn and desperate between laughing and crying. He gripped his knees, wanting nothing more than to be dogpiled in his living room floor in a mess of wagging tails and wet noses. That had always been his happiest moment, for once being the one to outpour his emotion into others. He couldn't swallow, his throat was so tight, and speaking seemed impossible. He wanted to call Alana. Call Jack. Wanted to hide in the empty closets at Hannibal's with his dogs and pretend he wasn't a real person for an hour or two. "You meant it then, that I can rent those rooms, formally?"

"Yes. This was my compromise with Alana. It effectively frees you from their mother-henning, and grants you similar freedom to be at home with me. Turn those spaces into whatever you need them to be. I have an unused work room attached to the garage that you may purchase tools and use for your mechanic work, if you need extra money. I will, however, continue to cook. And your clothes will likely be cleaner than they have been since the day you bought them."

"My dogs?"

Hannibal smirked broadly, pausing over his coffee, "Jack lives fifteen minutes away from my house."

Dead. Surely he was going to die before he ever made it back to the house. This was too much. Intentionally too much. This was what he meant, when he said there are better ways to wield power. Will was caught off his guard by the brunt of it, mind racing at the many facets coming together into this act of kindness so whole and well-wrought that it had to be a complete farce. His pride riled at it. His heart broke. It was hardly a whisper, but to his credit, he said it, "Thank you."

"You're terrible at asking for help. And while I respect someone who has the emotional density of a sponge being stand-offish and closed after losing everything, you are human, Will. Very, very much so. I encourage it. Further, considering their blatant use of your ability as a bargaining chip and career bolster, I feel they owed you this. Rather, they owed you the consideration at least. Jack is not truly out to kill you, but he's the sort of man that runs a man down and then drags him by the belt until the job is done. Alana's heart is the consistency of brie. The slightest contact leaves an impression, and she thinks very highly of you. And between them, the two of them…there is me. I think I see you more plainly than either. I would like to be approachable, Will. I want your time with me to be of benefit to us both, and I can't do that when you do not speak to me. Skittish does not suit you. Loss does not suit you. And it is in my nature to overwhelm."

"It didn't feel like a loss until five minutes ago."

"That, Will, is called 'shock'. There is a reason it is dangerous. You must afford yourself the opportunity to grieve."

“You’ve never seemed more like Jack to me than in this moment. Battering me open like a locked door that’s inconvenienced you.” Will bit his tongue, taking a shaky breath. “That sounded more caustic than I intended.”

“I know.”

“Shut up, Hannibal.” Will was still worrying at his lips, staring blankly into the snow ahead. “You’re making my ears ring.”

Chapter End Notes

Lots of Dialogue in this one, please alert me if any of it is unclear. Thank you for your feedback, it's encouraging. I'm stretching my claws in this one, and it's starting to feel a little more natural. Be warned, it pretty much goes downhill from here.

Cabaletta

Chapter Summary

In which, Hannibal speaks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They still hadn't moved. Will sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the numerous packages spread on the desk. In three days, he hadn't opened a single one. Pride and gratitude were completely incompatible in the short time he'd had to mull over them. He missed his house. He missed his dogs. He missed his autonomy. Of the gifts, he appreciated Alana's the most, knowing she'd been the one to turn Hannibal to his favorite crafting materials. Despite that, they sat there unattended, because he couldn't bring himself to create anything at the moment. He'd lost inspiration, but he hoped it'd return. The case files were a little more inviting, being largely the product of someone else's imagination and having all the physical labor completed weeks ago. The files had no real expectation of a result. That seemed the surest route back to…respect? He chewed on the word a little more, not sure how to handle his own recalcitrance. Hannibal, specifically, had put a lot of effort into bringing these elements together to put him in a prime position for healing, and all Will could think was how…controlled, he felt. This was the most labor intensive gift he'd ever received, and he wanted to throw it all out that perfectly draped bay window a few feet away. This was a king's gesture. Will didn't like feeling petty.

He was trying really hard to be grateful, but everything in him hated Hannibal for this. Perhaps not Hannibal, exactly, but the degree of arrogance on display here…that was worthy of distaste. Despite his being goaded to speak, the investigator had spent the majority of the three days since Richmond avoiding his new living partner. He refused to think of himself as a roommate. A boarder, perhaps. Any implication of the temporary nature of the arrangement made it easier for him to think. The house was beautiful. The mind he shared it with was also, admittedly, beautiful. Will didn't feel like he belonged here, and he didn't want to live with Hannibal. The sheer volume of thought the man picked up and discarded every day made Will a little sick to his stomach, and he was confident that if he stayed too long, it would begin to erode him. That left leaving. Actually, that made leaving sound wonderful.

He'd find an apartment nearby, once the insurance was done sorting out his disbursement. He thought it once, clearly and concisely. Then again, affirming that he was making it a decision, and not a scrap thought to be dismissed at the first convenience. One from which Hannibal couldn't discourage him. He rubbed his face again, walking over the bathroom and looking at himself. A cursory shave or two in the weeks since the fire and his hair had gone to hell.

He searched the drawers and found a travel kit with scissors and a short razor. Further search turned up expensive shaving oil and enough towels to make a quilt. He shrugged the robe off, and stripped down for hot shower. The boxes seemed to mutter behind his back as he closed the door.
He scrubbed every inch in water as hot as he could possibly stand. His hair hung nearly to his shoulders when full of it, and the feel of it covering the nape of his neck was cloying. He had a towel in it almost before he turned the water off. He cracked the door to let the steam out and wrung as much of the excess as he could while he waited for the mirror to clear, mulling over his conversations to come. He needed to thank Alana. He'd thank Jack for the kennel, but not the case files. And Hannibal….

He met his own eyes in the mirror, sighing heavily. He supposed he'd talk to Hannibal. They'd been in each other's circle for the last three years or so, but moving in opposition, one coming in just as the other closed the door. Their shoulders hadn't brushed until last summer when Jack pulled them together on a case. He'd gathered his general impression of Dr. Lecter from the papers he'd published denouncing some of his colleagues. Having met him, those papers seemed a lot less pretentious. It was the opposite of what he'd expected. He considered what he knew of the doctor as he took out the short comb and pushed his hair into submission.

Dr. Lecter was extravagant, but not excessively so. Will had heard of the parties, but they were always celebrations of some local event…a colleague's latest award, the opera house's 40th anniversary party, charity fundraisers for the hospital where he'd completed his internship. He was an heir, working for the pleasure of it and living on his modest income. The house he bought was built to contain as much palatial dressing as its owner could ever afford to buy, but there was none to be found. Hannibal put more effort into curating his living space than many directors did museums, every facet of a room built to upon the one previous. A number of the antiques had come with the house, and Hannibal had restored them himself. The coffee machine's repair had been on the docket this month, but Will suspected that money had since translated to the packages in his room. He picked the scissors up and spread the towel over the sink, kicking the rug out of the way. Starting at his nape, he ran the thick dark strands through his hands to get a physical sense of the length he wanted and started patiently on one side. Trapping hair between his fingers, he trimmed and snipped at awkward angles, and the hair began to fall away.

One finger's width left at the neck. Two for everything between his eyes and his ear lobes. The top, he started from the front, trimming away and back, using the comb to suss out stray length and coax it all into place before it dried. It was a little time consuming with the new tools; he normally had a certain brush that he always used, and bigger scissors. Still, it was much tamer now.

There were lines of stress on his face where there hadn't been before. Will oiled the razor and his face generously, frowning as he tilted his head back to clear his neck of stubble. The beard shaping went quickly with the new blade. When he was done, he stood there for another moment, regarding himself. His idea of himself. He felt better, having carved that person from the disheveled wreck that stepped into the bathroom. Honestly, he hadn't realized how bad it had become. No wonder they looked at him sideways and asked if he was alright. Will was confident that he had the perfect genetic make-up to go become a sailor and

completely forfeit human interaction in favor of the silence and chaos of the open ocean. Perhaps he'd buy a boat instead a house. An apartment. An out.

God, he needed an out, these days. He folded the towel up neatly and used it to mop up the clumps of black hair from the tile floor. Another quick rinse in the water, and he felt….lighter. Hannibal had loaned him some clothes, and he chose a simple sweater and slacks, a pair of black socks. Comfortable clothing. It was time to be human again. Time to go downstairs and make coffee and discuss some unpronounceable dish to be served on tiny plates with modestly high-end silverware and real crystal. Time to go.

Dressing was easy, that last part was not. He hesitated at the top of the stairs, touching his face, his hair, his beard, holding his coffee cup like a bannerman might, as though to say 'Nevermind, this I am, and nothing before or since has mattered.'

He padded down stairs, through a dark living room, through the dining room with its ingenious greens garden, and stepped into the light. Hannibal glanced at him and his knife stopped midstroke, his expression gaining some barely perceptible warmth at the edges and eyes. The doctor smiled faintly, and Will quipped, "You might have told me that I looked like a caveman before taking me out to Richmond."

"You might have showered."

"I…might have, yes. I cede the point." Will's lips pursed wryly. He made a straight shot for the coffee machine, reloading the bean chamber, and starting a black coffee for himself. When he turned around, the doctor was looking at him bluntly, and Will didn't have the chance to brace himself for the abrupt contact. The expression said nothing outright, it was just a look, as though to say he carried himself differently, and Hannibal noticed. Will wasn't sure if that was an encouragement or not, but it felt…intentional. The doctor could hardly deny his effect on people after admitting that subtle manipulations were his favorite game. Will knew Alana, at least, was among the party of rejected admirers. He wasn't supposed to know that, but his intuition was a curse sometimes.

"So." Hannibal's voice interrupted his mental ramblings, and Will gathered his cup and moved to stand across the cutting board from him. It felt too close, but he was tired of ducking the enormity of the man's presence. It felt cheap. 'Skittish', as Hannibal put it. It was time he learned what Will thought of subtle pressure(which, frankly, was that Hannibal could fucking choke on it). Will held that expectant gaze for a moment before turning his attention to the beef tenderloin on his board. Hannibal's smile took on an edge of teeth. "I trust I cannot go amiss with steak and fine beer?"

"Hardly. I admit I was just getting used to the sweet meats, though."

"Sweetbreads." Hannibal corrected gently. "I have had a fierce love affair with organ meats for the past few years, but occasionally, I prefer lean muscle. I will braise this, and we will cork a barrel of my amber ale."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not drink with my therapist." Will said, hating how defensive that sounded, but annoyed all the same. "The temptation to poke around in my head—"

“Given my own sundry habits, I am the champion of moderation.” Dr. Lecter returned graciously. “Anything of interest in your head will reveal itself in time, whether I’m actively proceeding with your therapy or not. Though, to be honest, the idea of living with a patient appalls me. I can’t emphasize enough how private a person I am.”

Will lifted a skeptical eyebrow, “You’ve given me fistfuls of information at every turn. “

“No, I gave the information that you already had context.” Hannibal countered, the edge returning to his features as he finished dressing the loin and began deftly cutting it into filets. “I have made an effort to ensure that your perception of me is not clouded by your opinions, considering how determined you are to shape our interactions by them. You are not a carnival mirror. You’re not allowed decide how I’m perceived in my own home. You’re not as interesting as I am.”

“…I don’t feel that I’ve been unfair in my assessment of your character.”

“You just suggested that I was leading you to drink so that I could ‘poke around in your mind.’” Hannibal opened his hands in a placating gesture. “It was rude, and an insult to my genuine curiosity about you. I would rather the opposite happened.”

“You want me to poke around in your head?” Will followed cautiously, annoyed at being called out on his own underhanded arrogance. Of course that had been his assumption. Hannibal knew exactly why.

“You yourself admitted that my presence was part of your adjustment.” The doctor rubbed two the steaks with some dark spice mixture and transferred them to a searing skillet. The rest were deftly rolled together with plastic wrap from his cabinet, to be stored after dinner. “If you’re curious, I would encourage you to ask. However, for you rudeness, I will only answer one question tonight, and in turn, I will ask one tomorrow. I think that falls well outside the realm of professional psychoanalysis.”

“This feels like an arranged sleepover.”

“Arranged, perhaps, but neither of us have been sleeping well.”

Will met his eyes again, considering. Hannibal let him look. After a moment, Will stuck his hand in his pocket and fished out his glasses, starting to turn away. “I apologize for being rude. I am used to men like Jack Crawford attempting these conversations with me and failing miserably. My impression of you is…vague. A large presence, but no hard edges, no definitive shape or volume. It’s frustrating, it leaves me unbalanced, and I feel like your constant upperhand is condescending.”

“I will own that.” Hannibal nodded, turning the steaks. “You are not the first to brand me such.”

“Fine. I’ll wait until after dinner…and I will have a beer with you, Hannibal.” Will sighed quietly, for himself, in no particular direction. “But I think I’ll go light a fire for now, and consider my questions.”

“Thank you. Dinner will be ready in about half an hour.”

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It was three hours later, however, that the question took shape. On his fourth pint of the admittedly remarkable beer, Will’s eyes narrowed, mulling it over. Hannibal had turned the overhead light off on his last trip to refill the glasses, and the sun was gone from the sky. Will supposed the shadows had taken some part in the nature of his request. He was still for another moment, watching the sharp profile in his peripheral vision. They had claimed the two armchairs at the fireplace, each perfectly placed to warm their feet without causing undue discomfort from the heat. Will tended the fire, Hannibal tended the beer, and together, they lapsed into harmonious silence, broken only by the expectation of Will’s coming question.

He tilted his head, finishing his pint and holding the beer on his tongue. It was spicy, vibrantly laced with exotic fruit and a malty body. He could drink more than his share, probably had already, but Hannibal kept returning with more, and Will did not complain. “Hannibal.”

Will could barely distinguish his voice from the fire at first, but he felt the man’s eyes on him now. “Yes?”

“What do you dream about?”

The doctor’s chin turned with the weight of the question, and Will left it hanging between them without prompt. The fire muttered under it, and the ringing in his ears returned, his heart loud in his ears. He examined his question, slowly turning his head to—

Forget how to breathe. There was intensity in the doctor’s expression that he’d never seen before, and for the first time, Will thought he was looking at the whole of Hannibal Lecter in those dark eyes. The gold light was harsh on his features, lines exaggerated into caricatures of the handsome design, leaving an impression of wariness. Eyes slightly narrowed, and mouth parted as though to speak, Will felt a small rush of pride at having surprised the man. For once, it was Hannibal that took pause.

And after a moment, he began to speak, lifting his voice just slightly over the fire. “I have had very few dreams in my lifetime. They are singular events, without narrative, without repetition. They are not induced by stress, and they are not mundane. Every one of them has left me shaken to my core, rattled the bones of my persona in such a way that I dread them. I can never predict them. And in them, I can never wake.”

“I will tell you of my most recent dream now, and save the others for when you and I are more intimate. The context is lost on me. I awoke in a desert, the earth as I knew it was an endless waste of sand and dust. There had never been water, in this world. I hunted there, and knew myself to be the incarnation of death itself. Nothing could touch me. What small scraps of life I encountered had always fallen to my hand, and always would. It was bleak, and yet warmth pervaded my heart when I beheld the mountains of ash in the distance. There was nothing there for me, and all was mine. I hunted well, and every moment I breathed. There was no sun, no moon, no time to pass, just the air in and out of my lungs to mark my endless

progress. I would run. I would sleep. I existed outside the concept of birth, death, and self, and it had always been that way.

“While hunting, I came upon a relic. A sarcophagus of unspeakable beauty, carved by no hand or mind that I had encountered. I dug it out of the sand with long claws and perched atop it, tracing its lines with the barest tips of my fingers. I felt power within, thrumming and alive, searing into my skin like the memory of love, and loss. I felt rage. It scarred me deeply, to be mocked by stone, to be reminded that I was lacking those things, when my existence had seemed perfect and elemental only moments before. I again knew regret, and joy, and pain. I recognized my…self, depicted in the stone. I rocked on my heels and pressed my palms to it, hungry, unfulfilled, and half-panicked that the sensation might leave if the sarcophagus disappeared before I could get it open. I set my shoulder to it, and pushed. It didn’t appear to move, but I felt it give, the barest grind of stone reverberating in my shoulder. I took a deep breath fuelled by that blinding rage, and terror, and threw my entire being and my new perception of it into moving the lid. It slid away, and the thud it made as it fell shook the ground. I knew others would hear. I was jealous. Fear soured my mouth again.

“I leapt to the edge of the impossibly large box, perching on fingers and toes as I beheld the being within. It was not me. It was slender, waifish in build, and so blindingly white that I wept. I knew it lived, though the air in the sarcophagus was cool, and thickly scented of burial herbs. Upon its face rested a vermillion mask, as pristine as a fresh drop of blood, glimmering in the dim light. The mask mocked me. The rage returned so strongly that I burned."

Hannibal paused, swallowing and beginning a bit hoarsely. The edges of his lips curled ever so slightly, his teeth just—“So, I raped it.”

Will’s eyes narrowed, some chill settling in his blood as he lifted his chin in question.

“I had never experienced lust before. It consumed me, riding the fire in my chest like a new brand alight, I couldn’t set myself aside from it. Not love, not pain, not joy or sadness could have pulled me back from that precipice. I fell on the creature with all intent to devour it. It screamed, and that riled me unto blindness. We fought.” Hannibal continued, eyes on the fire, a hunter’s grin upon his features. “I chewed it. I clawed it. I bruised and twisted it until it yielded to me, and that victory *ruined me*. I forced myself upon the creature, and existed between worlds for hours, on the cusp of release, my teeth buried into bones. It tasted like life. It tasted of seasons, and time, and I savored every drop, every stroke because I knew when I pulled away, it would be gone. Destroyed. But I exhausted myself, without remorse. When I finally let go, I wasn’t sure that it was still breathing. I regained myself and sat there panting, tasting the last of it, luxuriating in the feel of my newfound self, my murdered immortal. And I lingered there forever after, wondering what I had just done.”

Those eyes found his again. The fire burned low, but the cold persisted, and it was hard to draw a complete breath. The salacious grin was gone, replaced by an echo of vaguely wounded confusion, and profound loss. The tension in them was palpable, and Will rested his head against the chair, still holding those dark eyes with his own, refusing to crush something as fragile as a moment’s intimacy with a beast by shying from it. It was a beast, that looked back at him. He felt it as concretely, as assuredly, as he did the alcohol blurring the edges of

his thoughts. Something within Hannibal watched him, something real and heavy. Will let him look, wondering himself if the question had been worth it. Wondering what Hannibal had done.

Chapter End Notes

heyndrix : "Does Will have encephalitis in this? He's so vulnerable in S1, and treated much like a child by those around him. His situation seems even more precarious in this by living with Hannibal. "

No, the more I progress,the more convinced I am that I want to abandon the context of season one and turn this into a sandbox endeavor with these two characters. Their backstory is already very well fleshed out, and there are better crime writers out there with more patience than I have. My plots are usually contained in the holes of someone else's, but I think the writing done by the producers was spectacular. I'm not breaking any new ground here, not really. For me,this is about stretching a character into something I can wear and speak through. It's an exercise. I want to expound Will's relationship with Hannibal, and watch it devolve again. I hope that's interesting enough without the murder-frolicking of my previous works.

Thank you, all thoughts are welcome. It may not be for all audiences, your discretion is appreciated.

Berceuse

Chapter Summary

It's dark in here, and we may die.-- Lewis Black

Sorry for the delay guys. This conversation gave me fits. I still don't like how it turned out, but I suppose it will make more sense as we progress and Will gets himself good and fucked in Hannibal's head. SO. Onward.

There's some microscopic flirting in this chapter, I dare you to find it.

“I cannot describe the look you are giving me.”

Will jumped slightly, forcing himself to relax. The fire burned lowly in the mantle, and he ran his tongue along the edge of his teeth, watching the wisps of smoke that escaped the front grate. He’d forgotten it could happen this easily. With proper storytelling, with enough emotional elements in place, and the overall gravity of Hannibal’s presence, he’d followed him like a pied piper down into that dream. It clung to him like a spider web. The vague sense of desolation lingered, a fine dust floating between them, the ashes of a vibrant moment. He was there, in that wasteland, but the doctor still existed separately from him, and for that he was grateful. “I…am trying to stay afloat in your dream, at the moment. Something about it is visceral. My ears are ringing again.”

“Visceral is a perfect word, I think. I had not intended to bring you there with me.” Hannibal did not sound angry, but there was something strange on his features. The micro-expressions he used to communicate were exaggerated by the dying light, stains of pained satisfaction lingering. “There are more questions, aren’t there? Ask them.”

There was a pause, and Will curled his leg underneath him. He had been here before, several times over the course of his life. People that he knew with various degrees of familiarity would work their way to this conversation with him, usually in similar context, a dark room or nighttime bonfire. It was always a poorly crafted invitation to fix them. Will’s nature was to nurture, and his ability was to reflect and give others a new perspective of themselves...to give them the opportunity to stand before a mirror of emotion and motive. Few realized how draining that could be for him. When he was younger, he’d had great difficulty refusing people, and the constant burden of harboring pieces of people within himself had left him raw, a scalded mess of nerves. Years ago, though. When he was a kinder person. It had been a long time since he’d accepted a personal invitation into someone else’s mind.

That left actually exploring it, however. The beaten path here had no lights, no map, and no compass, moral or otherwise. Hannibal’s existence belied those things, his mind crafted more intricately than anyone Will had encountered prior to him. At least he had the assurance that

Hannibal didn't need to be fixed. Instead, a vast library of stories greeted him, each waiting patiently in its place to be turned over and examined. That begged the question of whether or not he wanted to explore…wanted to know the man watching him so carefully from behind his tacit expression.

He thought, faintly, that the answer was yes. King's gestures aside, it would be thrilling to know how deep it went, whether the labyrinth made sense at its core. He cleared his throat quietly, choosing his words and trying to keep his tone even. "…Sorry. I'm still…hearing it. The wind, the grinding stone. It's hard to stay grounded when I've been drinking."

"I will keep it in mind."

Will nodded again, clenching and unclenching his fist as he stretched his mind in that place, the threshold of Hannibal, and felt around. The new headspace was more than enough to hold him, where others felt like poorly tailored clothes, glimpses through dirty windows. He took a deep breath, and slowly, elements of the dream came to the surface. An impression of violence lingered, and murder, too, but nothing so concrete that he wanted to withdraw. He thought there may be a cataclysmic loss somewhere, and yet it was hushed, filed away in some corner that he knew existed but could never hope to unlock. The walls hummed with the oceans they held. It was distracting. "Is there any truth in it? Have you ever been sexually violent with someone?"

"Yes."

"Consensual?"

"Dubious."

The answer dropped like a hammer between them, and Will's throat worked as he waited to feel…something. Disgust, rage, fear, anything that he was told he was supposed to feel. In that quiet place, the world with no light and mountains of ash, nothing answered. It felt carefully empty of emotional clutter, with a hush as thick as fallen snow. A dull ache in his heart answered it after a moment…he recognized it as loneliness, but it was his response to the quiet, not Hannibal's. His compassion would be the death of him, but Hannibal's silence stretched on, ignoring it. Will didn't want to speak. Didn't need to, really.

"Will?"

"I'm not…thinking, right now." Will muttered, trying to what? Reassure him? This wasn't judgment; he wanted that to be clear. "I'm just…here. Breathing."

Hannibal's gaze became less expectant, his voice quiet. "How do you breathe?"

"*Quietly*, Hannibal." Will shook his head, rubbing both hands over his face as he let his head rest against the chair. "I…understand the loss. I heard it. I understand how the vibrancy of what you encountered would be unsettling. And right now, in this moment, I understand your reaction. That may not be true tomorrow, in the light of day, but that won't matter."

Hannibal didn't answer, so Will continued.

"I think it's not in your nature to reach for people. For anything. Hunting, relentless search for your small satisfactions, *that* I can feel, but the overall tone of this place in your head feels…distanced? And yet encompassing." And just like that, words failed him. He made some inane gesture into the air, sighing. "I can overlap this place with my idea of you very easily, so the concept of you as a sexually violent person is not completely outside my interpretation, but I'd imagine it's…a hard part of you to reach, and isolate."

"It is, and I would not necessarily tie the elements of sex and violence together so tightly."

"Exactly." Will pointed at the floor, talking with his hands as Hannibal yanked that analogy from his head like a tooth. "They aren't. Not with you. That…manifestation of your desire to consume doesn't really fit, somehow. There is virtually no circumstance that comes to mind that would bring you to that particular physical solution. That's not to say that you're incapable of it, because I tend to believe the mental wiring is very much in place. But…I don't see a perfect cocktail of circumstance that would lead to your committing the physical act of rape. Consumption is the only word."

"For the act of the rape, or for arriving at that solution?"

Will frowned, tripped by his own phrasing. "…I think you would find a more elegant way to consume, but if you were ever driven to something as crass and tactless as rape, it would be in the name of consumption. That's why I believe there was a physical component in the sarcophagi to begin with. Rape has never been a purely physical act; the very essence of it is bound to dominance, control, destruction. But I can see a distance between you and those emotional elements. I can feel this…disconnect. It's strange. I think my understanding the scenario is limited to the sarcophagus, and if you, through some miracle, deigned to rape someone, it would in essence be the *first* rape, all over again."

"You are more adept at this than you credit yourself." Hannibal laced his fingers, making a dismissive motion with his shoulders, "Or, honestly, than I credited you, as well."

And Will knew in that moment that he was not the first person to receive such an invitation. "No?"

"No. I have…put you in a unique position, to understand elements of me as they are, and not as I would usually have them interpreted. I know for certain now that I was not wrong in assuming that you could gain a perspective."

"Now that I'm here, it makes a little more sense."

"It's interesting to me that you interpret the emotional impact of other people on your mind as going to a 'place'. You keep mentioning being 'here', with me." Hannibal watched the fire through his crystal. "It makes me wonder if such experiences could be tailored for the ease of translation."

"That would be…leading, and ultimately dishonest, I think. Whether you intended to deceive

me or not, it's an emotional process, not a logical one. You're attempting to cover or change what I experience would only be the same sentence in a different language. The message doesn't change."

"I believe I disagree, but I want your experience of me to be genuine."

"Why?"

"Everyone wants to be seen, Will."

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Will hovered in the doorway with his file tucked under his arm, hands loosely in his pockets. His every effort to shut the dream out of his mind had failed. He lay awake for hours, until the alcohol picked up the story and took him deep into sleep. There he wandered, listening intently for Hannibal and the telltale sound of this dream coffin sliding open. He never found them, but felt th

at they existed always just on the edge of his vision, between folds in the air. He awoke late, but rested, with his brain still metaphorically on fire.
Hannibal sipped his tea and gestured to the chair across from himself at the breakfast table. He looked vastly different in the sunlight, but Will was not quick to dismiss the person he'd met the night before. He pulled the chair out and seated himself, splaying his hands over the open file. "I keep searching for better ways to phrase my questions, but I'm not…capable, right now. I want to be blunt. I think it's best if we were blunt with each other. "

Hannibal nodded, the curl of his lips almost feline. "As you wish."

"I am not trying to insult you." Will hedged carefully, resting back against his chair. "But…I don't want you be my therapist. And you don't want to live with a patient. And it seems you're not…entirely boring."

"…You could try harder." The older man didn't quite chuckle, reaching for another tea cup from the carousel centerpiece and pouring Will a cup; the scent chamomile and blueberries filled the pause in conversation. "I will admit the question surprised me. I had expected something more…conversational."

"I don't actually do conversation well." Will offered with a half-smile. "I wanted to know why you're so intent on my knowing you better. I'm not really your type. From what I've heard."

"No. My professional friends are typically useful to me, in some way. Rich, affluent, educated…"Hannibal lifted a brow. "Empty. If I'm to be completely honest, I'm not sure why I want you to know me. I cannot justify it to myself. I just know that last night is the first

time in a long time that I have had to think about what I wanted to say. A majority of my conversations begin and end with my spoon-feeding to others answers to questions they weren't aware they were asking. And you're my antithesis…you tend to get lost with them, working from within, out. I can't stand doing that myself. You are…a mirror."

"That's the second time you've taken something directly from my head and said it aloud." Will's fingers drummed, his expression skeptical. "And you strike me as a man who knows himself very well."

"You know what to expect when you go the mirror, but you still go, Will." Hannibal countered easily, his oddly colored eyes brighter in the sunlight. They looked more alive than they had the night before. "I am not asking for a profile of myself, just…curious as to what your impression will be, when you're done."

Will was quiet for a moment, then "Don't lead me. I've never…just…reached like this, before. You're asking me to haul the guts of your subconscious out onto a table for inspection. Usually, I'm after something very specific, something highlighted by a long line of broken ideas and screwed psychology. If you want it to be genuine, *you* have to be genuine."

"To the best of my ability." Hannibal replied, pushing his chair back. "I have to prepare for work. I will see you tonight for dinner."

Accelerando

Chapter Summary

> This chapter came to me quickly, though late, and this story remains unbeta'd. If you see something, say something.
>
> Cheers All.

It was becoming easier. Another month passed, and aside from a tense exchange about the purpose of the dining room table, they were communicating better in their loud silences. Will's work tended to sprawl around him, and Hannibal's desk was very effective at keeping his projects in order and stifling his creativity. One afternoon, he'd packed his current hook and his attachments into a tackle box and moved downstairs, covering the elaborate ebony table with them. Hannibal hadn't spoken, simply frozen in place in the doorway, and something about his expression *still* burned whenever he thought of it.

This table was fair game, however. Hannibal considered the kitchen a working space, and Will loved the morning light in the breakfast nook. Consistently an early riser, if he slept at all, Will was often the first one downstairs, and the small compartmented box he tucked under his arm helped wile away the hour before Hannibal made his appearance, and breakfast. They watched each other working from the corners of their eyes, the doctor pausing when he suspended a knot between his pliers and the clamps for a feather, and Will hesitating curiously whenever something was added to the skillet on the fire. It was as peaceful as rooming with a tiger could be. Sometimes they spoke, and sometimes Will spoke to himself and his project, muttering delicate obscenities that made Hannibal smirk over his tea. Will was due to begin teaching again at the end of the semester, and he often recited the skeleton of a lecture to the professor over dinner…the man's eloquence allowed him to better articulate the abstract elements of the cases.

Their more intimate conversations had been stalled at every turn by their schedules. Despite the abundance of quiet working moments, they never seemed to sync. Whenever Will had a question prepared, Hannibal would return to the house with company for dinner, and whenever Hannibal watched him expectantly, Will was already divested between polishing his coursework and his dogs. There were more questions. Every questions bred a succession of follow-ups, and it had only been a single dream, one of an admitted sequence. Will' s curiosity got the better of him late at night, when he lay awake and tried to convince himself that he didn't need to know more, not in that hour, not even that day.

That morning, it was Hannibal that finally dusted the topic off and set it squarely between them. "Would you like to drink tonight?"

Will smiled, trailing seed beads down a short length of Spiderwyre and securing the loop before glancing over at the doctor. The invitation seemed rather blatant, but it was good to know that it hadn't been forgotten. "Are you up to it?"

"Very much. I have cleared my schedule for tonight and tomorrow."

Will's brow furrowed, because he hardly thought that it would require that much time to develop a question and suss out his answers. He thought back to the last conversation over the fire, and a short chill ran down his back. The beads in front of him went abruptly out of focus, and he sighed gently, dropping his hands while he settled into the memory. He forgotten that it had taken him a day or two to shake the dreamscape Hannibal had created for him. He wasn't sure why he assumed the time off was for the doctor's recovery. "Kind of you. I think we could go with a little less ale this time."

"Agreed. Ale with dinner, and after, I had tea in mind."

"Yes." Will nodded, leaning back into his project and threading a tiny curved needle through a scrap of doeskin. "Tea would be perfect."

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Inexplicably, Will was compelled to keep that hook in his pocket through the day. After availing himself of Hannibal's sundry cheeses and half a glass of pinot for his afternoon meal, he tied his last knot a few hours later, capped the sharp edge, and tucked it into his pocket, effectively ruining the plume. He realized exactly what he'd had for lunch as he was washing the dishes, and resolved to go see his dogs again. Catching remnants of the doctor in his habits was unnerving.

The drive to Jack's house was exactly fifteen minutes, no matter which of the three lights he caught to the expressway across town. Jack had met him at the door with an unusual exuberance and bear hug, and he could hear Winston and Jacks whining excitedly before he ever made it over the threshold. Jack's back porch was large and covered with a door and two short steps down to the grass. He was abashed at the clamor his pack made against the door when they saw him, but after a moment to guarantee he would not be standing in a puddle of their excitement, he bullied through the door and took off to the far end of the yard. They gave chase and life was good for the next twenty minutes, full of wagging tails and wiggling fur. Jack and his wife watched from the porch for a minute before wandering back inside. Will exhausted them as much as he could before heading to the new kennel and opening its side door. Eight beds on two levels greeted him, the second beginning at his hip. The smaller dogs loved that, it allowed them the rare opportunity to assault his face with love. He flipped the beds one at a time and fluffed them. The water trough was full but filmed over, and he drained it, laughing as they muscled in for the challenge of drinking the fresh water as soon as it left the hose. They failed, and the trough filled a moment later. Jack fed them on the porch, something Will approved of considering that he'd done the same. They seemed to be settling in nicely, and he felt a familiar ache for the woods and stream on the edge of his property as he watched them watching him. He wanted to run them properly, until the smaller dogs lagged stubbornly behind and waited under a thicket for him on the return trip. In the corner of the shed was a comfortable chair with a lamp, and Will settled into it, hands

immediately full of curious noses and soft ears. It was not home, but it was close enough. There he remained for the next few hours.

Jack came to fetch him shortly before dinner was ready, offering to let him shower before joining them. He declined politely, quoting Hannibal's dinner menu in very, very poorly enunciated French. Bella winced and covered her ears, and Jack ushered him out the door with a fresh shirt. They hovered on the step together, hands entwined as they waved him down the drive again. Will rather thought he liked this version of Jack…the intimate, Home-Jack. Jack at Rest. Jack and Wife. It suited him, the way Bella's presence soothed his perpetually ruffled feathers with a soft feminine counterpoint. That Jack was easy to get along with.

He kicked his muddy boots off outside the door, forgoing the scraping until the dirt had dried enough to be manageable. Herbs and garlic greeted him inside the door, and he inhaled deeply, locking it behind him. Hannibal appeared from around the corner with two pints, took one look at him, and turned on heel. Will laughed quietly, taking in the muddy paw prints and the distinct aroma that they imparted. The doctor had a very acute sense of smell, Will had learned to his chagrin, and there would be no conversation until he'd showered and changed.

Neither took very long, and there was a moment, upstairs in the bathroom, when he pulled the wilted hook from the pocket of his discarded jeans and considered it carefully. Still unsure of why, he was compelled to put it in his pocket again, checking the point's cap with the tip of his thumb. He assessed himself in the mirror, dashing the extra water from his hair with a towel. He looked healthier. He looked well rested. Perhaps he would need a shave soon, but there was nothing pale or disheveled about his appearance anymore. Proximity to Hannibal was affecting his upkeep, it would seem. It was rather refreshing to see himself and recognize that person.

Hannibal met him again at the doorway with his pint, and the slighted curl of his features was gone, somewhat mollified. Will marveled that he'd put so much thought into the kennel given his obvious distaste for the animals. Distaste was too strong a word. Will thought Hannibal reacted to dogs in the same manner he did small children, with resolute disinterest. He sipped his ale and took up his customary post at the end of Hannibal's working counter, watching him plate their elaborate meal and handing him things as he pointed. Hannibal had long given up on referring to things by their true name. Will thought maybe the chinois/strainer incident had been the last straw. It was a strainer. It strained things.

Will smiled at his own pun but didn't dare share it, passing the expression off as praise of the completed plates. This, if anything, was Hannibal's religion. The doctor even insisted that he be seated before bringing the plates into the dining room, because it mattered that one were mentally prepared to appreciate food. Will didn't even think it was his obsession with his own culinary skill so much as genuine reverence for elevated food items. The doctor was never short of King's gestures.

Dinner passed slowly, with little conversation, but the silence between them was inexorably working towards comfortable as Will learned to adjust to Hannibal's presence. He limited himself to three pints that night, instead of six. He was pleasantly warm when he set his fork and knife across his plate to finish the last sip. "I have had several good questions cross my

mind in the last few weeks, and they would disappear the moment I'm given leave to ask."

"I can appreciate your hesitance, but I mourn those questions. So…will you continue dissecting our first conversation or move on to something new?"

"Something new, I think. Having a broader understanding of how your mind works helps me frame them."

Hannibal's expression slid through a smirk into something thoughtful. He stood and cleared the plates, returning a moment later bearing a tray with a tumbler of whiskey, and a tea pot full of flowers and herbs. He set them down and handed the whiskey off to Will first, ignoring his frown. "I am aware we agreed on three pints, but I ask you to trust me. In the endeavor of building this…'place', with you."

Will hesitated, eyeing the glass. He hadn't allowed himself to return completely to that head space in a month, but the weight of it lingered. When he was alone, in the quiet of his room, it pulled at him, until his stray thoughts began to take on elements of Hannibal's dream in a way that he could not quite pin down. Sighing gently, he nodded, pulling the tumbler closer and tipping it back. It occurred to him that Hannibal only drank Scotch, so this bottle must have been purchased for him. It was of decent quality, all burned sugar and warmth. He leaned back in his chair and considered the tea pot curiously, but he didn't recognize its components. Hannibal poured him a cup, and the silence stretched on until he had finished both. Hannibal poured him another and began to speak lowly.

"My gender is fluid in these dreams. I awoke slowly, as a young woman. I lay wrapped in a dirty blanket on stone, and did not open my eyes. I had to work very hard to breathe. There was no sound except for my heart and lungs, and the smallest scratch of something in the blankets with me. It quieted after a while. There was no light, but I was aware of the time passing, and I did not care. I had been sick for a long while, it seemed, and every muscle in my body was weak, atrophied beyond repair. Despite this, I was young still, my mind bright and feverish as it struggled to make my body obey it."

Will blinked, focusing on the table as he stepped into the scene, eyes tracing the grain of the wood and the way the harsh light reflected on its surface. Hannibal continued, watching him carefully. "At some point, I grew strong enough to move, and stretch. In the act of uncurling my legs, I put my foot through a patch of dried fur and bones. The scent of rot made me gag, but my bed mate had expired a long time ago, and nothing remained of it but the dark crust of blood and bits of leathered skin and guts. A handbound journal presented itself under my fingers, thick, with dark, smudged pages. I concentrated on sitting up, and working my eyes open. It had been forever since I'd seen the sun, but I searched for it instinctively." Hannibal paused here, and Will's mouth was dry. The room felt darker, though he was sure it was not. He resisted the urge to look around, concentrating instead on his immersion, and the sweet, sickly feeling growing in his stomach. It was pervasive, and deep, and he swallowed thickly, sipping more of his tea. The cup was full again, Hannibal had refilled it without his noticing. Will closed his eyes.

Hannibal's voice seemed quieter, there in the dark. "I found myself in an abandoned warehouse, on a dais under a collapsed portion of the roof. The sky above was a mottled

purple and grey, the sort created by city light and no moon. The ceiling seemed inordinately high for the building's depth. I could not remember anything more than waking up, and I could not stay that way for very long. A deep wound on my thigh oozed, the blood thick and dark as ink, but it somehow bled straight through the fabric to the stone, and trickled away over the dais' edge. The sickness reached out of my gut like a thorn, a heavy weight on my mind and shoulders, and after looking my fill, I let it bear me down to blanket again."

Will finished his third cup and reached for his thigh. There was no blood, but he'd been sure —

He met Hannibal's eyes, and they were blurred. The room was, every detail Gaussian and hazed together into an impression of space instead of a reality. Except for himself. He pressed his thigh harder, because it needed to stop, but he wasn't sure he could force it to. Something wasn't right.

"I heard a woman's voice." Will did too, turning his head towards the kitchen to catch the mutter.

"Pulling me up from the depth of my sleep, speaking to me gently, fondly even, in a language I know now has never existed in any form on the planet as we know it. Nothing historical or modern has ever come close to matching those words." Of course not, no one else knew how to speak with their souls, Will's mind supplied, still curious as to whom it was, swaying slightly as he leaned towards the voice and then back again when Hannibal spoke,

"I understood that she loved me, and that she aged and was dying at my side. She told me to stay there, for as long as could. She told me to remain quiet, and unobtrusive for the stars. I mourned her in my silence. After a time, she faded, and I knew she had been protecting me. Whatever I was, I was not right, not meant for this place and its people. As I lay still, I was dimly away of a door behind me, open to the world outside and its people. It rained there, and they walked marched forward without ever seeing my shrine, and its gutted interior. I thought perhaps someone there would be willing to protect me. I opened my eyes, sorting out my fingers where they fell across the thick pages of the book, and I knew better. This book would tell me why. This book *was* why. With much effort, I rolled onto my back, gagging up at the sky. My throat worked to swallow, but the rain outside the door did not fall on me here."

He longed for it, reaching for his face and hoping to feel water. Instead, he knocked his glasses to the table, and Hannibal quickly stole them away, tucking them into his jacket. Will blinked, but his tongue was made of cotton, he couldn't protest. A wave of dizziness swept from the front of his brain to the back, tilting his head to look at the ceiling. He could feel the doctor moving, a cool hand on his head, then gone again. He missed the woman's voice, something plaintive in his features as he tried to follow the touch away. The lights went out, and he blinked again, but no, there was nothing in the dark. His vision hadn't failed, blinking once, again, no, there was just nothingness there waiting for him. "The clouds roiled before my eyes, the ceiling lost to the darkness and the stars. They hovered just through and inside the hole above me. I blinked, trying to force them back into place, but it was not my sickness tricking my vision. There, at the edges of the roof's collapse, just inside the edge of the shadows, the stars hovered, blinking, bright lights."

Something bright, a pen-light perhaps, appeared in his left eye, and a strong hand gripped his jaw, locking his head back against the chair. It hurt, and his heart picked up unsteadily, the sick feeling growling low in his chest. He leg bled, bleeding forever. He couldn't lift his hand, and instead pressed it to the perceived wound, as hard as he could, raking the heel of his palm over it as though the stroke would convince it to stop on his own. He felt weak. He felt tired. The pen light was gone, and specks of color danced in its wake. Hannibal's voice was closer, disembodied from the grip at his chin, leaving him suspended between the two.

"They surged in and out of focus with every heartbeat. I just wanted to breathe. Slowly, the pitch black darkened, and the lights became more intense, a contrast I instinctively feared. The stars watched me. Slowly, one at a time, I became aware of the great beings watching me, how vastly tall and empty they were. Their eyes, my stars, turned and slid away into my peripheral vision…a silent, hunting stride that chilled me to the bone." Will felt the panic lock his spine and he leaned, pulling away from the grip with a whined protest, trying to breathe, trying to think, but he couldn't make the blood stop, it just—

"I struggled to sit up, and managed, though barely. One remained, waiting." Lights, dancing specks of light solidified into a undetermined head of an indescribable creature made of pitch and fear. Will thought his heart might burst. A steadying hand appeared over it, and he settled somewhat.

"I tore the book open and pressed the pages to my wounded thigh. The blood became bright again, red with my life and my fear. I soaked page after page, and tore them out, throwing them into the air, my offering."

Will was aware of an intense pain, though whether it originated in his leg or his palm was ambiguous. The grip at his chin shifted to his throat and tightened slightly, and Will abruptly recognized the slick feeling between his skin and the denim. He found strength, fueled by fear, to throw the pages. He felt him, just over his shoulder, felt the shiver in that grip as blood spattered the table, the crystal, and another hand gripped his wrist until the spasms passed and he quieted. "The stars remained, unmoved."

Liar.

"I exhausted myself in the effort, and my wound pulsed freely now, robbing the last of my strength and sending it spilling warmly over the floor." God, he was so tired. So wretchedly tired.

"I knew then, why she'd told me to remain to still. Why she'd left me there to die. It was necessary. A new beginning would come of my end, the death of my innocent existence a release to those who waited." Will nodded faintly, his whole word swaying with every beat of his heart and the warm, but cooling, trickle down over his wrist and the doctor's fingers.

"The last of the light and darkness turned away from me." Will sighed, failure and pain flooding his mind. "A moment later, a long, dark claw speared me from the side, through my skull."

A white blinding pain erupted behind his eyes, traveled through his scalp—no, originated

there as a merciless fist appeared in his hair, lifting him from the chair. “And pulled me back into the darkness to be consumed.”

A low sound of terror wound its way past his lips, a sad, softly animal cry, something from the soul-spoken language of loss and death. He could not give it shape, and it did not require it, and he fell to the floor, sustained only by the titanic grip just above the nape of his neck. It felt solid, grounding, while the floor that he knew to be hardwood was nothing more than blood-slicked concrete. He panted there, suspended between realities, and reached.

Hannibal let him. Bright, bright, searing pain in his right palm woke him further as he wound a fist into the doctor’s shirt and climbed, pressing a numbed face to the man’s pant leg. He stumbled up the dark, the grip neither helping nor hindering his progress as he struggled to find his feet with a body that forgot what movement felt like. Several times, he hung from it, breathing sadly, every inhale and release stained with his loss. His heart was breaking, his heart *raged*. He reached anyway, and Hannibal met him, unyielding, as Will mapped his face, his shoulders, gripped his shirt and then the sun appeared.

Will twisted to see it, the chandelier lit and seemingly spinning to his distraught eyes. Abruptly clear, he reached for the grip in his hair, tugging at it ineffectually, and stared at the table. His overturned tea cup, the ring of condensation stained a bright crimson by…that, his blood, spreading in small, coin-sized pools over the ebony and reflecting the light with glassy efficiency. He squinted at it, reached for his glasses, and the doctor tightened his grip, turning his head to look at him.

At the stars.

Still blinking against the brightness, he witnessed a constellation of dancing spark on Hannibal’s forehead, Hannibal’s…bloody, features; Will shivered lowly with his fear again. He pulled away, bracing both hands on Hannibal’s chest, but the doctor did not release him. A large smear of red covered his eye and spread down his cheek, and Will’s throbbing palm was still marking him, seeping through the Egyptian cotton between his hand and the doctor’s warm chest. His tongue was still too thick, slurring, “Hann…Hannibal, what’ve you done?”

“I was unaware that you had something sharp on your person.” Hannibal answered, and Will though something bright in the man’s eyes answered him more completely. He was smirking again, something vicious and soulless in the expression, and it made the fear in Will’s belly coil itself tightly. Hannibal reached for him with his free hand, turning him bodily toward the light, and Will heard a quiet snap as the hook broke free of his beads and feathers and Hannibal held it up to the light. The doctor tossed it to the table, where it marred one of the congealing spots Will had painted over it.

“Let…let go. Of me.” Will pulled again, and Hannibal shook him once, sending him back into a paroxysm of stress.

“No, I am holding you up, Will.” He replied curtly. “And, I have drugged you, so that may be the case for the next few hours.”

“You…can’t…do that, it’s not genuine.” Will didn’t even know what he was saying, but it

sounded plausible enough in light of how very disembodied he felt in that precise moment.

“Is it not?” Hannibal looked at him, and Will protested, watching the blacks of his eyes spread until no color remained, blinking—it was gone, and Will suddenly felt his body again as the wave receded and he settled into his frame. He snatched his head away, and in a split second decision, slammed his forehead with all the force he could muster into that mouth, and then pushed past him. He stumbled through the dining room, glancing back at the doctor in the doorway to the living room. He stood there, dignified and pristine, painted in blood with a fresh gout spilling from his split upper lip over his chin, shoulders squared, and expression enigmatically accommodating, calling across the room, “Will, I need to stitch your hand.”

Will fled.

Fugue

Will's body betrayed him. There was nothing except the rabbit scream of his heart and the cold rush of air past his lips to tell him that he still lived. There was a voice somewhere over his shoulder, but he couldn't discern words through the thick cotton that seemed to overlay every sense. He was afraid, so phenomenally afraid that it was a marvel in and of itself, something that he was more than happy to cling to because it carried the weight of his self-preservation within it. It bid him to be quiet and still and wait, quarry in a brush in the thick winter silence of Hannibal's mind. He wasn't sure how he'd gotten there. Every concrete line of his being was woven into breathing and slowing his heart rate to something acceptable.

Breathe, the voice said, but he heard 'exist'. It was impossible to live in the limbo. The space between them was taut, thinned to a mere thread of connection so bright and tenuous that he was sure simply breathing would be its unmaking. Surely now, he'd die. Perhaps now. This breath. Now, this one.

No, the voice told him, and Will's heart refused to listen. Panic drove him into absolute splinters, and some sound on that last exhale resembled a screaming laugh, a horrified funeral giggle, as all that remained of Will shook the snow and sprang from cover.

Hannibal's arms locked around his chest, the spring cut short by superior placement of weight. Lucid for a handful of seconds, he didn't recognize the room he woke in. A low fire muttered in the corner, throwing large shadows over a library, and a desk. A hooded lamp glinted from its depth, and an ornate rug covered the distance between the desk and…the bed. Hannibal's bed, Hannibal's room. His hand throbbed, trapped between his body and the mattress, pinned to his side by the sure grip holding him still. He quieted, and the grip loosened only slightly, but Will was thankful. He blinked hard against the dark, watching the shadows warily to—

To mind the stars? The nonsensical thought carried all the weight of a hammer in his mind, and his head lolled slightly against the pillows. What the hell did that even mean? Hannibal was speaking again, but the words blurred together in his ears and bled away without recognition. It was immensely frustrating. And curious. Some animal instinct told him to keep his eyes on the dark, to watch for the movement that meant he'd failed again. Nothing flickered there except the fire, and Will denied the fear, studying the flames instead. Warmth began to creep into his extremities…rather; he became aware of them once more and in the same moment realized that he hadn't been before. Slowly stretching his ankles and his wrists, rolling his shoulders in the broad arms that held him, and bit by bit, the world came into focus. The context of it all returned to him, and he was sure that somewhere in the very center of his brain, at the apex of all that made him human, there was an ember of rage waiting for the body to follow suit and explode. Nothing about this felt sane. Nothing about it felt real, or fair. Everything, every solid, real thing in his current moment existence reeked of Hannibal. Even the sheets.

He clung to that anger, because in that moment, it was the most tangible scrap of himself to be had. "What happened?"

"…Is happening." Hannibal corrected gently. Will took a long breath through his nose and out again, and flexed against the doctor's hold on him. The arms tightened again, as though laced with steel. "Stop. Will. You're going to make it worse. There are no stars here, right now, and I need this lucid moment with you to apologize."

"No."

"Yes, Will, I had not anticipated the breadth of your…empathy. Truly, I overestimated your defenses in the matter, and I'm afraid there are a few hours left."

"Left of what?"

"…The tea."

"Ah." Will replied bitterly, slowly running his tongue over the edge of his teeth. His nerves were a source of static at the moment, any given sensation highlighted with absolute clarity to the detriment of all others. There was something tacky in the creases of his fingers, and he tested it, letting it dry to powder and roll away. An intense flash of Hannibal in the dining room, bloody and curious, made him flinch. The words hissed through his teeth as the arms gripped him again, trapping him to the bed, Will snapped over his shoulder, "Fucking *brilliant* , doctor."

He felt Hannibal stiffen behind him, and could just feel the slight narrowing of his eyes, but the rage was catching. Will shrugged against him, a short, frustrated rock of his shoulder that he hope belied how very, very badly he wanted to punch the doctor in the face. "What did you give me?"

"Something *curated* ." Hannibal bit off, and Will deadpanned, fervently trying to set the man's desk on fire with his glare. The doctor continued. "And brilliant. I don't have the patience or inclination to describe it to you."

"I told you that you would redefine rape." Will muttered, blinking as the fire hazed out of focus for a second. He frowned, but it didn't come back, and slowly, so slowly, the feeling in his extremities began to fade, color bleeding from the scene before him.

Just over his shoulder, Hannibal sighed, a trace of warmth over his neck. "Will. You're about to go to a very dark place…a place where your body and mind exist separately of one another. If you continue to insult me, I'm going to make you go there alone. And I will leave you there, in the dark, desperately trying to balance your frantic heart and lungs until you are a maddened, worthless wreck of a human being, a shell of your former self. I will lay waste to all that you are and aspire to be. I will leave you an empty, desecrated piece of meat, Will."

The arms tightened again, cold overtaking his stomach and chest as the stars began to flicker overhead again, thunderously silent and reaching—"I will do *exactly* , that."

It would be easy, Will realized, watching the stars watch him and the quiet of Hannibal descended around him like a heavy cloak. There was nothing he could do to prevent him from administering more of whatever this was; this acid trip anxiety attack cum laude. He could imagine any number of ways that the doctor could do what he promised, and no, none

of them felt like options that would leave who he was as a person intact in a meaningful way. He said he'd wanted this experience to be genuine, and it was. Will simply hadn't anticipated Hannibal being so well versed in this work. He waited, and the room seemed to move around him. After a second, he realized he was rocking slightly in the doctor's grip, and he seized that second, that blink of control that left him firmly seated in his own mind again, to protest, "Don't."

Hannibal didn't answer him. Will asked again, the cold forcing its way into his heart again and closing his chest in tiny increments as it took ground. "Don't leave me there. You…did this. To me. I didn't—"

"Hush."

"You asked me. To look, and I did, and you can't—"

"Will." There was warmth in the doctor's tone that shattered whatever the rest of that protest had been. He lay shaking, willing a traitorous body to listen. "You are here of your own volition, though I have opened every door. You don't have to leave alone."

The pain blossomed low in his skull again, a sudden, unyielding crack, as the claw went in, and Hannibal's fist tightened in his hair again. "But you also don't have to *leave* ."

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Waking up was an improbability in those long hours of dark. Will felt the world apart from and above him, a smooth surface of still water miles away and just within reach. He fought for it, clawing his way out of the depths of it and wondering what he was leaving behind. Wondering why he was still so heavy. There was no air here. There was nothing but silence and the knowledge that he was going deeper, despite his every refusal to let it happen. Will fought forever in the long dark, waiting for the sun to reach down and catch him before he settled in the mire that waited below, but nothing came.

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Fingers closed on his jaw and tilted his head up. The fire destroyed definitive features, rendering Hannibal's face an elusive and changeable thing, a living mask with two dark eyes behind it that saw the world. Will shied from it, but Hannibal's hands were firm, holding him still for inspection. He thought for a moment that he broke the surface, feeling the dark recede to his ears and trickle down the back of his neck. He tried to gasp air into burning lungs, but the doctor's knees remained tight around his ribs. The panic welled up again, the cold black pooling higher, back in his ears, his mouth, and Hannibal's hand settled on his face and pressed him back to the pillow, holding him under.

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Warm fur. He could smell his dogs. He knew this, and in the next second, he knew he was breathing too quickly, so rapidly that it hurt; his chest sore and his throat raw. He tried to open his eyes, but they didn't answer, leaving him uncomfortably blind. Seeking hands found small ribs and soft ears, and Will's touch became insistent, gathering the dog close and

inhaling against the fur. A long tail fanned against his legs, but no puppy wiggles shook him, and for that small mercy he was grateful. One of the older boys, then. He imagined Sequoia's brown eyes and dignified expression, and his face smiled on its own. Taking control of his body was like grabbing at fireflies. Every chance to regain some twitch of the foot or turn of the head threatened to release the others from his grip. He focused intently on breathing on his own, at a pace he determined. An hour or so into the night, with Sequoia's tail steady against his leg for good measure, he managed to take a long, luxurious breath, and released it as slowly, pleased with himself. It would be okay to sleep now, he knew. It felt better. He settled into the blankets with his dogs, another quiet scrap of life in the heap of furs. It occurred to him as he drifted off that Sequoia had died the previous summer.

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Gray light filtered through rain and clouds, too bright to be dawn. He didn't know the time when he finally managed to open his eyes again. His hand lay next to his face on the pillow, and he experimentally flexed his fingers, curling them into a fist. They answered, and that was a beautiful thing, to watch his body respond to a mental command after hours of being locked away inside this meat cage. Meat, and bone, and blood that he'd had since birth, and none of it had listened to him. He felt the dissonance with a new clarity, still slightly removed from the way he applied pressure to the mattress, how certain muscles tensed and others didn't as he pushed himself to sit up. There were no dogs, nor the scent of them, and he frowned in confusion, feeling for his glasses.

A blurred outline a few feet away shifted and came into focus, Hannibal in a fresh shirt and slacks. The doctor offered him his glasses and Will put them on without meeting the man's eyes, taking in the details of the room that had been lost to him. The walls were lined with thousands of books in simple bookshelves designed for function. They were elegant, but not ornate, and Will knew they were his, made by hand to fill every spare inch with storage for the works both historical and modern that dominated the room. His desk was placed comfortably against a wall, and rather similar to the one that he'd bought for Will's tack and materials. The bed was large enough. A small, jagged line of fresh sutures crossed his palm, but it wasn't deep and remained numb to the touch. He realized abruptly that he was wearing clean clothes, the sheets were changed, and swallowed thickly at the idea of his night-sweats invading Hannibal's perception of him. The embarrassment became immediately bitter when he realized that no, it was likely not just sweat that had warranted the change.

"Stop. Thinking." Hannibal ordered quietly, standing not quite over him at the bed's edge.. "I have made my apology, and taken steps to protect your integrity through the night. Had I wanted to embarrass you, I would have."

"I wish you'd respected me enough to let me come to my own conclusions about who and what you are."

"You haven't come to any conclusions. Nor have I. If I'd wanted to know every sordid detail of Will Graham, I could have taken them last night. But you asked that this be genuine. So I did not."

"I trusted you."

“A mistake, perhaps. I considered this a calculated risk in our friendship.”

“I think you’re a little generous in your description.” Will sighed, rubbing his eyes. “I feel...crazy. For allowing that to happen.”

Hannibal regarded him coolly, so composed that Will compulsively wanted to wreck him, everything-- tear his pristine shirt, split his lips, break his nose this time-- the doctor’s words pulled him back from his fantasized violence, “You are not crazy, and you did not exactly allow it. I took liberties with the expectation of a more...formative defense, on your part. Bluntly, I feel you have done nothing to protect yourself from your pathology. The anchors you use are not adequate. The methods are underdeveloped and generally weak.”

Will bristled at that last, and Hannibal amended. “You are not weak, but your mind is a sheer cliff and you are either in control of it or...not. There is no gradient for the descent. There has been no effort to attempt to build one.”

“I thought we’d agreed that I wasn’t your patient.”

“If you were, I’d be writing this down, and you’d never hear a word of it. If you were a patient, there’d be a certain degree of contempt in place to keep me separate from the mess of you. Imagine my frustration.”

“Yours?” Will’s nose curled, galled. “I just spent the night in hell...to what, entertain you?”

“To demonstrate my self-control, actually, but if you don’t have any interest in developing this innate talent into something useful, I’ve likely wasted my time.”

“It *is* useful.”

“In the strictest sense, yes, but I don’t relish the idea of turning you inside out every time I wish to look in the mirror.” Hannibal returned to the abandoned desk chair. “I don’t believe you understood what you were offering. Or perhaps, more accurately, you didn’t understand what I wanted.”

“Genuine. Useful to you.” Will did not move from his place on the bed, watching the older man and hovering between his rage and his frustration. “I have never needed more than what I’ve built. I’ve never offered this...ability, not as a personal service. It’s expected of me. You’re expecting it now, admittedly.”

“I do not require ‘fixing’, Will.” Hannibal reminded him. “I gave you an infusion of mushrooms, opiates, and a mild steroid. My intent was to help give your exploration a...path, so to speak. A curated tour of my dreams and their role as a distillate of my personality.”

“Even if I cared what your intent was, the *method* --” Will shook slightly, fixing his eyes on the man’s for the first time and willing him to feel how close he was to hatred, to the wanton destruction of every cultured impression he’d made of the doctor. Hannibal did not flinch, and that was worse, somehow. “Was *base* .”

That struck a nerve. Will could not pinpoint the defensive brace that washed over the older man at his choice of words, but he bullied on, snapping lowly. “You tricked me. You drugged me. I feel like you cut me in half, and I didn’t want that….I didn’t allow it.”

Hannibal leaned back, reaching over his shoulder to pick up a small notebook. Will raked a hand through his hair, noting it was...clean, slightly damp, and it fueled him on, “You stuck your fucking hand in my head, Hannibal. Without reverence, without...respect. It was rude on a good day, and fucking reckless on a bad one. You can’t...meddle in here, this is *me* .”

“And I, am?” Hannibal interjected as he was inhaling to begin a rant in earnest. The notebook opened to let a pencil slip into the doctor’s fingers, and closed gently against his thigh. The sound made Will lose his train of thought. He glanced at it, momentarily free of the doctor’s eyes, and Hannibal repeated the motion, lifting the small book and letting it fall. Again. Tap...tap...tap, Will shook his head, uncomfortable with the amount of focus he was directing at the tic. Hannibal didn’t speak again, and Will’s brow furrowed, torn between the man’s face and that sound. That sound reached into him, and a crack appeared in his reality as he recognized it. As though to confirm the idea widening his eyes, Hannibal turned his wrist, tapped...and turned the notebook away across his thigh. Sequoia was dead. Not only was Sequoia dead, there had never been a dog in Hannibal’s room. Will was looking at it, at the ‘tail’ he’d used to time his unsteady breathing when he’d woken alone in the dark. The idea was horrifying, the reality was--powerful. He blinked hard, pressed his eyes with his fingers as he tried to reconcile the idea that he’d been so disconnected that Hannibal had kept him alive with a fucking notebook. As though mocking his tiny epiphany, he heard another, cleaner, bright sound. The pencil ringing on the desk as the doctor rolled it between his fingers. And that, he felt more than recognized. He sat in silence while Hannibal found and maintained the beat of his heart. Together, he felt it was a map of his life, a fleeting, tentative thing that bore only this definition for the moment, the constant in and out and below that, the ticking clock of muscle. Hannibal never wanted for King’s gestures, ever. Will met his eyes with uncomfortable clarity, running the doctor’s warning through his mind again as he listened to it. He’d gone to a dark place, yes. He’d drowned in it. He’d asked Hannibal not to leave him there alone, caught between his mind and his body as he fought to keep both running simultaneously. And he hadn’t, Will realized...Hannibal hadn’t left him, and he’d opted to maintain these physical aspects of him, leaving his mind largely untouched aside from the tools he needed to work. His greatest comfort, the dogs...and Sequoia, his unspoken favorite and oldest friend, Hannibal had pulled that memory from the tangle of panic, pain, and nightmarish imagery to soothe him, bring him back into a position to keep himself alive. The nightmares were Hannibal’s. Surely, he’d owed Will at least that much.

The understanding was still bitter, but he couldn’t answer the man’s question. Hannibal was the man that had kept his heart beating. The notebook and pen kept time with him for a moment longer, then slowed and stopped. Will hid his mouth behind his injured hand for a moment, thinking. “Am I supposed to thank you for that?”

“No.”

“Good, because I can’t.” Will answered, dropping his eyes to hover somewhere near the man’s chin. “And I can’t do this if you don’t respect me. And I don’t know what you want.”

“I have told you, Will, I wish to be known.” Hannibal answered, some tired expression settling into the corner of his face. “It will become apparent. And I will not drug you again until you have a progressed enough to withstand it. But I am not going to coach you, either.”

“I’m not sure I still want to do this.”

“I’m not sure I’d allow you to turn me down now.” Hannibal reminded him, “I have a stake in this matter.”

“Hannibal, you’re not asking me to look at you. You’re asking me to coexist with you, and I’m not...comfortable with the idea. I can appreciate the ease with which you might have fucked me up last night, okay? But I can’t credit you for not doing something wrong. I won’t elevate your self-control in a contrived moment of weakness on my part. You can’t take that from me.”

The doctor’s lips pursed, but he nodded shortly. “I know. But I do want you to understand that my interest is not entirely selfish. I would like to help you, in exchange. I am aware that what I am asking is not easy. But I also genuinely believe that you are capable of it. There are things I wish to know. Questions I have never been able to answer because I have never allowed myself to consciously be all that I am in one place in one time.”

Hannibal stood, smoothing his shirt and taking a step towards the door. “I want to know if I’m capable of love, Will. And hatred. And ecstasy. And rage. I want to be greater than the sum of my parts.”

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